EDITORIAL

How long will it last?

Not long after I came to the Lister Hill Library in 1995, I went looking through the records to track the history of how certain decisions had been made regarding the implementation of our integrated library system. This was not difficult to do. Reports, memos, correspondence—all were carefully filed and organized. I spent a couple of days going through the files and found not only the specific facts I needed but much else about the preceding decade as well. The half-century history of the Lister Hill Library was easy to read.

A few weeks ago, I was trying to understand how certain decisions had been made regarding the nature of faculty status for Lister Hill librarians. Same story. In the university archives (which are part of the Lister Hill Library), I found, in the papers of one of the previous presidents, a series of communications among senior administrators that described what had happened and how—much of it information that had not been made available to the librarians at the time.

Twenty years from now, when one of my successors attempts to determine how and why I made some of the decisions that I did at the turn of this century, how successful will they be? Not very, I'm afraid, because all of my communication is electronic. It is backed up according to standard procedures, so that we can recover them in the case of a computer failure, but that is intended to be a practical backup, not an archive. The backup files are only kept for six months, and the computer center is considering shortening that.

Major reports are printed and filed, so they will still be preserved. But there is no paper trail of memos and daily communications and meeting minutes—the sorts of things that lay out the discussions, wrong turns, deliberations, and compromises that are the substance of what is palely reflected in final reports.

Archivists are now beginning to develop systems intended to effectively address this problem. What I face in my office is, in a microcosm, a piece of the larger dilemma that we confront in dealing with the permanence of records in the digital age. The problem can be simply stated: in the print world, the best way to preserve something was to do nothing; in the digital world, preservation requires that we do *something.* But what that something *is,* we are struggling mightily to invent.

We need to distinguish between ''preservation'' and ''archiving.'' The challenge for archivists in the paper world, when presented with several boxes of records from the office of a departing dean, has been to decide what to throw away. Depending on the nature of the contents of the box, it is sometimes possible to throw away most of what is in there and still preserve the essence of the historical record. Establishing appropriate standards and practices for that level of decision making is what archivists do. Preservation is almost a secondary matter. Once the selection process has been completed, making sure the records are appropriately stored is critically important; but, as long as they are in the proper environment, the best thing to do is leave them alone. Archivists understand (as most laypeople, alas, do not) that the primary intellectual contribution of archivists is that selection process and the organizing that derives from it.

That intellectual challenge is the same in the digital realm, but it is overshadowed by the dilemma of preservation. Archivists no longer have the luxury of sticking those boxes in a corner of the storage room, keeping them dry, and waiting until time and resources are sufficient to process the collection. Too much stuff is disappearing before it ever gets to them.

Consider that in the paper world, every memo that left my office would have been collected somewhere (assuming a traditionally well-run office). It would not be something that I would ever have to be concerned about. Eventually, all those filed memos would end up in a box, that box would go to the archives, and an archivist would eventually process the collection.

Now, however, in an attempt to keep from overrunning my email storage limits or my allowable network drive space, I delete material on a regular basis, strictly on the principle of what I think I will need for my own near-term purposes. I do try to keep in mind the ''major'' stuff and avoid deleting the records of completed projects, if I think those records might have some value to me in the future—but I do not have any confidence that I am making good ''archival'' decisions.

I am one of the few remaining letter writers. When Lynn and I were courting, more than ten years ago, we were living in different cities, and, because we both loved the written word, I took to writing letters to her, with a fountain pen, on fine stationery. We used all the modern modes of communication as well: short emails during the day, telephone calls every evening. But in the letters I was able to express a different depth of feeling. I considered them to be little essays, with their own rules (no strikeouts, no revisions, no rewriting). For two years, I wrote her at least one letter a day, most days two, some days even three. Even now, when we travel apart, I occasionally write her a letter, so that she still gets ten or a dozen from me a year.

But this is just a sweet, romantic affectation between the two of us. This is not the letter writing practiced as recently as my own youth. It is not the letter writing that biography and history are built from. Almost no one keeps that kind of a record of communication and life anymore. We do it all by email and telephone.

The irony is that email commu-

nication is, perhaps, even richer in the stuff that history could be made of than the written record of decades past. Plenty has been written in the popular press about the particular style and tone of email communication: the informality, the inattention to standard rules of spelling and punctuation, the use of emoticons and shorthand abbreviations. It is a different style of communication from the written record of the past, with far less self-censorship (as most of us have realized to our embarrassment at some point or another). Not to mention the fact that there is just so *much* of it. While it might be tedious work for that historian of the future to sift through all of that email communication, imagine what they might make of it; what additional layers of nuance and tone they might find that would not have been revealed in the more formal communications of old.

Unfortunately, that historian is very likely not going to get the chance to do that tedious work, because most of that email communication is going to have long since dissolved into its random electrons.

Most of our focus, as librarians, has been on the preservation of the official scholarly record. I participated in the recent symposium at the Medical Library Association's annual meeting in Washington DC, ''Seize the E-journal: Models for Archiving.'' (I confess that post-meeting symposia strain my stamina, although they seem to have become increasingly popular. The notion that after four days of intense meeting-going, the thing to do is spend another full half-day immersed in one subject seems professionally masochistic. Of course, there I was on the podium, so what does that say?)

The organizers did an excellent job, and, despite meeting fatigue, the symposium was well attended and the participants enthusiastic and engaged. We may have been dead on our feet, but the afternoon was very productive. We heard about several approaches, ranging from the archiving efforts at the US National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the National Library of the Netherlands, the efforts being funded by the people behind JSTOR, and the innovative distributed archiving project out of Stanford, known as LOCKSS. In the small group discussions that followed the major presentations, we discussed what the pros and cons of different approaches were, what groups or agencies should be responsible for these preservation efforts, and what specific roles librarians should take.

These are huge questions—and very pressing ones. The technologies behind the various presented solutions were impressive and encouraging. What troubled me more was the question of organizational infrastructure. The national libraries that have taken on this commitment seem to be pretty stable institutions—when someone asked under what authority NLM was taking on this role, Betsy L. Humphreys, associate director for library operations, answered laconically, ''It's our legislative mandate.'' But that legislation is just over half a century old. There are no guarantees that some future congress will not decide that maintaining the infrastructure to preserve all of those electronic records is no longer in the national interest—or, at least, not affordable by the national budget. And the long-run stability of a private organization like JSTOR, or even a well-respected university like Stanford, is even more speculative.

When we have these sorts of discussions here at the Lister Hill Library, we can usually count on the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) archivist, Tim Pennycuff, to point out that paper is still a far superior archival medium than anything that we have so far developed for digital information. If we could only print out everything that we want to preserve, we could be assured that it will still be around, even if all of our grand schemes for preserving digital information fall by the wayside.

Unfortunately, it is already too late for that. Sure, paper copies of the major biomedical journals are still around, but even they are increasingly being produced only in electronic form. And what about the biweekly updates of Harrison's Online or successive entries to UpToDate? And what of Websites and multimedia presentations and complex databases—all of those new digital formats that cannot be replicated in paper, even if we had the time and energy to try to do so? We have crossed the frontier from the paper world to the digital world, and, barring some global catastrophe that puts an end to ''civilization as we know it,'' we will not be going back.

While these issues certainly concern librarians, they are key for our archivist colleagues. Browsing the Website for the 2004 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, one sees listings for preconference programs on ''Building Digital Collections'' and ''Perspectives on Digital Preservation'' along with sessions such as ''Managing the Digital Desktop,'' ''Information Technology for Practicing Archivists,'' ''Digital Institutional Repositories,'' and ''Preservation Policies for Digital Resources.''* The National Archives and Records Administration of the United States has made the preservation of electronic records a major priority, and it does not take a great deal of browsing in their Website to get a sense of just how massive (and expensive) that undertaking is.†

The librarians whom I talk with feel a great urgency about keeping their skills up-to-date and learning new techniques, processes, and procedures to manage their collections. The urgency that the archivists labor under is even more intense, because the records that they are charged with preserving are disappearing in front of them, as

* The Website for the 2004 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists may be viewed at http://www.archivists.org.

† The Website of the National Archives and Records Administration of the United States may be viewed at http://www.archives.gov.

completely as if a fire tore through the warehouse. In time, we might solve this dilemma. We may be able to establish the technological infrastructure, the organizational will, and the appropriate procedures and methods to preserve the records that history is made of. But we are not even close yet, and what we are losing every day can never be recovered.

I know that many of you are lovers of histories and avid readers of biographies. Take one of your favorites off of your bookshelf. Turn to the pages in the back that list the sources. Now, try to imagine that those people lived in the kind of digital world that we are moving into. When that biographer or historian began the research that resulted in the book you have in your hand, how many of those sources would have existed? Will someone in the future be able to read about you?

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Michael A. Flannery, associate director for historical collections, and Tim Pennycuff, university archivist, UAB, for their comments on early drafts of this editorial.

T. Scott Plutchak, Editor
tscott@uab.edu
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Birmingham, Alabama